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SUBJECT: POLICE KILL 6 TRADERS, ATTEMPTED COVER-UP
SPARKS RIOTING IN ABUJA SATELLITE TOWN

REF: 04 ABUJA 1786

Summary

1. The killing of six Igbo youths by police in an Abuja satellite town sparked anger among local residents, but the attempt by police to cover up the crime attracted nationwide attention. In the early morning hours of June 7, police shot and killed six auto parts traders, then attempted to dispose of the bodies surreptitiously. Enraged at this discovery, village residents burned the police station and several police vehicles. As is the custom in Nigeria, police claimed afterwards that the six were "armed robbery suspects," but neighbors insisted the youths were merely coming home from a nightclub. After the Acting Inspector General of Police organized a police investigative panel, attracting intense public scrutiny, the federal government intervened to appoint its own judicial panel. The investigation has been marred by the suspicious death of the likely shooter.

Six Youths Killed by Police

2. In the early morning hours of June 7 in the Apo mechanics' village, a satellite town on the outskirts of Abuja that is mainly populated by Igbo auto parts traders, police at a checkpoint stopped a car with six occupants and demanded money. When the driver refused to pay, an argument ensued, and one policeman shot and killed two male passengers. The four remaining occupants of the vehicle were arrested and taken to the police station in Apo, then moved to Garki police station inside Abuja, where they were later killed, allegedly to eliminate witnesses to the first two killings. According to the brother of one of the victims, his brother was surreptitiously speaking on a cell phone with him from the police station, when loud noises erupted and the phone line was cut.

Attempted Cover-Up Causes Rioting

3. After the killings, police sought the help of local Hausa laborers to help them dig a mass grave to bury the six bodies. (Note: Hausas are generally Muslims and Igbos Christians, but both ethnicities are well-known as traders in Nigeria. End Note.) However, Apo residents found and unearthed the bodies, then marched with the corpses to the police station. Police fled the resulting riot, in which the police station and several police cars were burned, and detainees at the station freed. There were reports that several policeman were also killed by the mob.

Intense Public Scrutiny

4. After the riot, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Police Commissioner, Emmanuel Adebayo, said the six were "suspected armed robbers who engaged the police in a gun battle." According to Adebayo, police had received a distress call from residents of Garki that their houses were attacked by an armed robbery gang. He further claimed that during pursuit of the armed robbers, the police engaged them in a gun battle and killed them. Adebayo also explained, "The corpses were deposited at the Garki General Hospital mortuary, but when no claimants came, health workers buried the corpses and were later attacked." (Note: Police generally claim that individuals killed by police were "armed robbers." While armed robbery is indeed a problem in Nigeria, it is clear that not all victims of police shootings were armed robbers. End Note.)

5. About 50 Apo residents were arrested after the riot and released several days later without charges, as is common practice following public unrest. There are unconfirmed reports that police still have several

residents in detention.

16. Acting Inspector-General of Police Sunday Ehindero organized a six-man panel of inquiry headed by the Deputy Inspector-General to probe the incident. The investigation was marred by the suspicious death in custody of the likely police triggerman. Several witness provided graphic testimony of police misconduct in the case, including a photographer's description of how police placed guns near the corpses and asked him to take photos, to "prove" the deceased were armed robbers.

17. After two weeks of investigation, the federal government abruptly waded into the case, appointing an "unbiased" judicial panel to investigate the incident. Although the police inquiry has ended, public interest in the case remains high, and Apo residents continue to demand justice.

Comment

18. Although extrajudicial killings by police are not uncommon in Nigeria, the attempted cover-up sparked public fury, as in the November 2004 killings and attempted burial by police in Kaduna (reftel). With the public deeply distrustful of its own security forces and widely frustrated at the poor economic condition and lack of political power, the frustration can quickly come to a boil over perceived injustice and abuse.

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